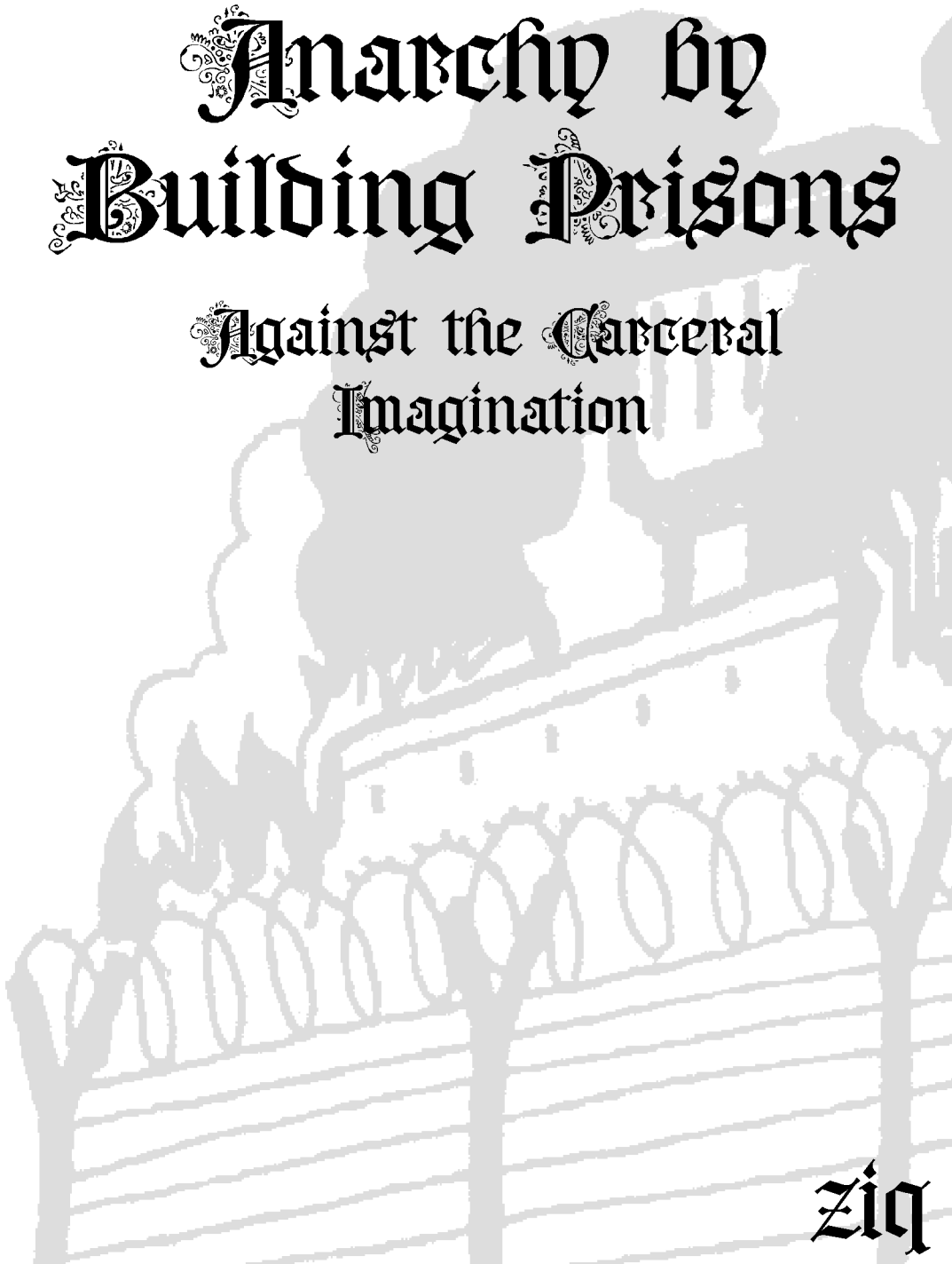
You Can't Build Anarchy by Building Prisons

Against the Carceral Imagination



[evil wizard distro]

Zig

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I'm genuinely disenchanted by how many internet anarchists seem determined to spend their time debating how they would build and administer prisons after their fantasy revolution. This new generation of YouTube-informed "anarchists" is honestly hopeless: people who have somehow managed to take a political tradition founded on opposition to prisons, police, and state coercion and turn it into an endless exercise in designing "better" ways to police and imprison people.

We're not getting a revolution in our lifetimes. More importantly, the world we actually inhabit is already structured around a vast prison-industrial complex. People, including countless anarchists, are being incarcerated, surveilled, policed, deported, criminalized, and subjected to state violence right now. Yet instead of working toward abolition, standing in solidarity with prisoners rotting away in cells, or even imagining radically different forms of social organization beyond police, prisons, and state coercion, this new crop of anarchists would rather spend energy debating the finer points of administering imaginary prisons in some hypothetical post-revolutionary future.

The priorities are baffling. There are real prisons, real prisoners, and real state violence happening right now, but the urgent question for these anarchists is what their hypothetical (democratic) prison system should look like in an imaginary future run by them.

Sure, they avoid outright calling them prisons. Their brave leader, YouTuber Anark (Daniel Baryon), prefers the more Orwellian-sounding

phrase "monitored democratic rehabilitation communities with required rehabilitative measures." But world-salad euphemisms don't change the underlying institution he's advocating for.

He says "permanent separation of citizens from society" should be rare, but necessary when someone is deemed an "active threat to the community." He then outlines a "tiered justice system," a "constitution" containing "laws," and courts i.e. his "community justice councils" that would try criminals, whom he calls "sequestered citizens" and "violators of the common law." Those councils would determine what "the process of rehabilitation and reparation" should look like, including when someone is forcibly removed from the community and placed in one of these "monitored democratic rehabilitation communities."

According to his fans, it's not really prison if we call the cells "democratic involuntary living quarters," the inmates "democratically instituted detainees," and the guards "democratic rehabilitative facilitators."

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Locked Up by Alfredo M. Bonanno

"What About The Rapists?" by (A)legal

3 Positions Against Prison by August O'Clairre

Against Prisons by Catherine Baker

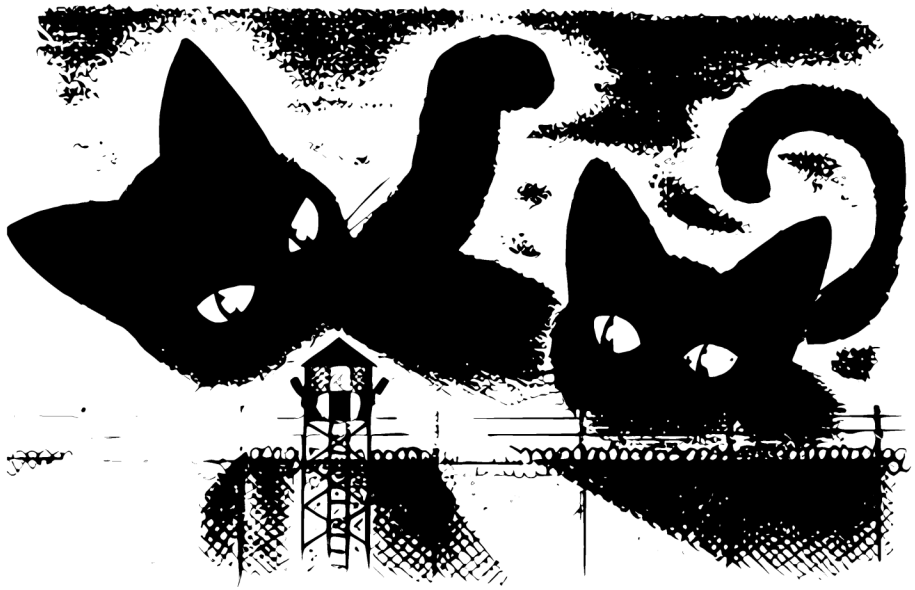
Toward The Creative Nothing by Renzo Novatore

Abolish Punishment by Punch Up * Kick Down Distro

I'm not interested in designing the perfect imaginary prison in my mind.

I'm interested in imagining a world where we don't need one.

If we're going to spend our limited time on this planet imagining another, better world, why make that imagination so small? Why not imagine a world where every prison is torn down and the very idea of them becomes absurd?



DESTROY ALL PRISONS

WTF is happening with these so-called anarchists who insist their leader isn't describing a prison? If they ever got their revolution, I suppose disruptive wreckers like me would be sent straight to the Democratic Rehabilitation Internment Facility for reeducation, where I could learn that my confinement is actually liberatory because the not-prison committee voted on it.

The whole discussion is perverse. What happened to simply calling coercion coercion? Where is the intellectual honesty? Why are so many self-described anarchists reaching for increasingly elaborate euphemisms for reproducing coercion rather than simply admitting that they want prisons?

They loudly insist I propose a “better system” to replace prisons, while treating as the only acceptable answer a marginally more humane or more democratically administered version of incarceration. I offer them something different: anarchy. And their response is always the same: that I’m merely using “anarchy“ as a buzzword, or that refusing to bless their redesigned prisons is just “LARPing.“

Apparently, asking whether we need prisons at all is “unserious,” while building a more egalitarian carceral bureaucracy is treated as radical. It’s maddening that to these kids, prison abolition counts as less serious than Baryon’s patented I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Prison.

If you reject anarchy because you don't believe it can address the problems you're concerned about, that's your prerogative. You're perfectly entitled to want law, government, police, courts, prisons, and

the institutional machinery of "law and order." No one is stopping you from going to law school, signing up to the police academy or applying to be a prison guard so you can work to reform the system.

But then be honest about what you're advocating.

To claim that prison reform is somehow "far more egalitarian than anything the world has ever seen" as one of these Breadtube-consumers told me is extraordinarily obtuse. It erases the enormous historical diversity of human societies, including countless indigenous egalitarian societies that existed without anything resembling prisons. It also assumes that the only possible alternative to the prison-industrial complex is a slightly nicer version of the prison-industrial complex.

That assumption is precisely what anarchism is supposed to challenge.

The endless demand that I provide a "solution" to crime is itself a symptom of the problem. It assumes that every instance of human violence can and should be solved through some universal institutional mechanism of policing, punishment, and confinement. I don't accept that premise.

Anarchy isn't a promise to eliminate violence or provide a bureaucratic solution to every conceivable form of harm. It is a rejection of the idea that the answer to every social problem is to create an institution with the authority to coerce everyone else.

I'm not a politician begging you for your vote. I don't need to promise you that I have the solution to every social ill. I don’t need to produce a Baryon’s prisons. Why are so many new anarchists suddenly so invested in defending prison?

At some point it starts to feel like a Twilight Zone episode in which all the anarchists have been replaced by the most smug and enthusiastic liberals imaginable. What I find most debilitating isn't even that these people disagree with me about prisons. It's the profound lack of imagination.

Anarchism should, at least in principle, be an invitation to think beyond the institutions and social relations we've been taught to regard as inevitable. It should encourage us to ask what becomes possible when we stop organizing society around hierarchy, domination, coercion, punishment, policing, confinement, and centralized power.

Instead, so much of the conversation circles right back to the same institutions: prisons, punishment, coercion, surveillance, confinement. Only now they imagine themselves in charge of them. And since they're devout democrats, they'll fix everything.

I don't want to devote my time and imagination to designing a more effective prison. I want to see the conditions that make prisons appear necessary transformed. I want to think about how people might resolve conflicts without reproducing systems of domination, how anarchists might respond to serious harm without simply recreating carceral institutions, and what forms of collective life might become possible when we stop treating punishment and control as the default answers to every social problem.

When you construct scenarios in which society can only remain safe if a rapist is locked away, you're not solving the problem of rape. You're using the existence of rape to justify reproducing the very prison culture and coercive social order in which rape remains endemic despite its prisons, police, courts, and vast apparatus of state control.

And what exactly is supposed to be "rehabilitated" in this scenario? A rapist does not need to be educated about the fact that rape is wrong. They already know it. The problem isn't a failure to understand right from wrong; it's the conscious decision to violate another person's autonomy. Years of confinement with a forced educational program followed by release doesn't solve rape.

If your response to every question about serious harm is ultimately "we need a council with the authority to imprison people," you're not describing anarchy. You're describing government with added doublespeak.

Turn off the YouTube grifters selling you a repackaged prison planet and read some actual anarchist theory.

Because some of the arguments now being made in defense of prisons are genuinely bizarre: prison is anarchist if it's democratic; prison is the same thing as self-defense; prison is necessary to defeat fascism; famous anarchists supposedly endorsed prison; restraining or killing someone during an immediate violent attack is somehow equivalent to constructing a permanent institutional prison system because "force = prison." These are all arguments lobbed at me when I dared criticize universal criminal-justice program for every community on earth. Unlike state socialists, I'm not a prescriptivist, and I would never presume to write rules for people in another community to impose on their own community members. I think the idea that people who don't know you should nevertheless possess the authority to write constitutions that invent laws to govern you is fundamentally hostile to the freedom anarchists claim to value.

I don't think an "anarchist society" is something achievable in this era, especially when so many of these kids remain deeply invested in the idea of ruling over one another. So when they demand that I explain exactly how some hypothetical anarchist society will respond to every conceivable form of violence, I genuinely don't understand what they get from calling themselves anarchists.

At a certain point, these questions stop being sociopolitical analysis and become exercises in writing science fiction:

1. What will the anarchist federation do about serial killers?
2. What will the anarchist commune do about organized violence?
3. What will an anarchist society do about someone who wants to murder people for pleasure?
4. What institutions will exist to investigate them, detain them, judge them, and decide how long they should be confined?

I don't fucking care.

We're talking about an imaginary society that doesn't exist and won't exist in my remaining years on this planet, and I'm not interested in pretending I can produce a universal blueprint for how every hypothetical imaginary community in the far-flung future should respond to every conceivable form of violence. That has nothing to do with any anarchy I desire.

Still, I feel compelled to explain what anarchist justice looks like, because if I don't, they'll insist I have no "solution" and keep pushing prison as the only cure for all their ailments. Well, they'll continue to do that anyway... but at least I can say I tried.

People commit brutal murders in capitalist society every day. We have police, courts, prisons, surveillance, laws, forensic science, enormous state budgets, and an entire institutional apparatus supposedly dedicated to preventing violence. Yet none of it allows the state to stop murder.

Anarchism isn't a prescription for curing psychopathy or preventing impulsive rage murders. There is no definitive political or social arrangement that can guarantee that nobody will ever decide to seriously harm another person. The existing system, despite its enormous coercive power and armies of law enforcement officers, cannot accomplish that either.

So stop demanding that anarchists possess some magical power that even the most totalitarian prison state demonstrably lacks: the power to guarantee that no one will ever commit violence. If prisons, police, surveillance, and the full coercive apparatus of the state can't accomplish

An anarchist conception of justice cannot simply parrot the state's answer of "just lock them up." It recognizes that violence and abuse don't emerge in a vacuum, produced solely by individual "bad people." The violence is also shaped by material conditions and relations of power. An anarchist approach therefore has to be concerned not only with what happens after someone has been harmed, but with transforming the conditions that make that harm possible in the first place.

That doesn't mean denying the reality or severity of individual acts of violence. It means refusing to pretend that institutional incarceration, and bureaucratically administered deprival of freedom are synonymous with justice.

Anarchy should seek to repair what has been broken while reducing the likelihood that the same harms can happen again. That means thinking in abolitionist terms: accountability without cages, support for survivors without turning their suffering into a spectacle, and forms of collective care and intervention that reduce the opportunities for abuse rather than outsourcing our safety to a council sentencing machine.

And if your hypothetical anarchist society only "works" so long as someone who commits rape can be sentenced to years of confinement by an institution with the power to deprive them of their freedom, then you haven't demonstrated that anarchy requires prisons. You've simply smuggled the prison back into the hypothetical and declared the thought experiment solved.

horrifying possible form of violence somehow obligates anarchists to throw their weight behind prisons to avoid inciting moral outrage.

You can't build an argument for prisons by presenting the most terrifying possible scenario while demanding I guarantee rape will never happen without prison. The people making this argument already live in a society where people are raped every day. The existing prison state has not abolished rape, yet these people insist abolitionists guarantee the elimination of rape.

An anarchist response to sexual violence begins somewhere else: prevention, consent, community care, survivor support, material conditions, and ways of responding to serious harm that don't reproduce the institutions of domination we're supposedly trying to abolish.

That means asking what makes abuse possible, what enables perpetrators, what leaves people vulnerable, how communities can intervene before harm occurs, and how survivors can be supported afterward.

You don't build anarchy by trying to shame people out of it with tiresome bait like, "I don't want people to get raped."

Neither do I.

Nobody needs to be convinced that rape is horrific. It being horrific doesn’t mean prison, however democratic you claim you’ll make it, is any kind of solution.

that, why pretend anarchists are uniquely obligated to provide a foolproof solution?

What anarchism can offer is a rejection of the state's monopoly on violence and an attempt to build forms of collective life in which people can defend themselves and one another without being forced to hand that capacity over to a permanent professional apparatus of police, courts, prisons, and bureaucrats.

When you remove the state's monopoly on violence, you also remove its ability to monopolize the means by which people respond to violence. That doesn't mean violence disappears; it means it is no longer centralized in a single institution claiming exclusive authority over legitimate force.

In a non-capitalist, non-statist society where people are deeply interdependent and rely on one another to survive, violence is subject to powerful social and material constraints. If committing violence means losing the trust, cooperation, protection, and relationships you depend upon for basic survival, or if you risk retaliation without police or prisons to insulate you from the people you've harmed, there are powerful incentives to refrain from violence in the first place.

A psychopath might be willing to risk arrest, trial, and imprisonment to satisfy their violent urges, but they might be far less willing to face an enraged group of people capable of immediately retaliating against them without a state to stop them. The point is not that the absence of police and prisons magically eliminates violence. It is that removing the state's

monopoly on violence changes the incentives and consequences surrounding violence.

Anonymity is also far harder to maintain in a culture where everyone depends upon one another and social relationships are essential to survival. You cannot simply disappear behind the bureaucratic machinery of the state and leave the consequences of your actions to an institution of strangers. Your actions follow you through your relationships, your reputation, and your standing within the social group.

Breaking the state's monopoly on violence means dismantling the institution that claims the exclusive authority to determine who may use force and under what circumstances. Access to violence becomes equal, and this means that the state can no longer protect some people from the consequences of their actions by monopolizing the means of retaliation on their behalf. People are no longer dependent on a distant institution to defend them, punish those who harm them, or decide what forms of force are legitimate. They must instead negotiate those questions themselves, through their relationships, communities, collective practices, and their own capacity for self-defense.

And yes, without a state or a system of law, no one has some magical authority to prevent you from declaring war on your neighbors. Your neighbors still have their own capacity for self-defense, however, and you would have to contend with their weapons, their relationships, your reputation, and the social and material consequences of your actions.

None of this guarantees that violence will disappear. It rejects the premise that preventing violence requires concentrating the power to use violence in the hands of a governing institution. How groups respond to violence will depend on the people involved, their relationships, circumstances, resources, and forms of social organization. Anarchists don't need to turn that complexity into a coercive universal penal code.

That is also why the constant demand that we provide a plan to "replace" prisons misses the point.

If you insist that I identify an alternative to prison, only to reject anything that doesn't amount to "same prison, but with more activities and administered democratically," then you've rigged the question from the outset. You're not actually asking what a world beyond prisons might look like; you're demanding that I justify the institution you've already decided is necessary.

The question isn't whether we can devise a more humane, egalitarian, or democratic prison.

The question is whether we should be organizing our response to violence around prisons at all.

And perhaps the most disgusting part of this whole discourse is the way rape gets deployed as a rhetorical battering ram for perpetuating carceral power.

The argument is always some variation of: "What are you going to do about rapists if you close the prisons?" As though invoking the most